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ON HEARING WHAT YOU WANT WHEN YOU WANT IT

By CARL VAN VECHTEN

THREE are times when life seems to be a very faulty reality. Reflecting to-day, for example, in my garret, I find myself in a melancholy mood following a perusal of the advertising columns of the newspapers. I have looked through the concert-announcements for the day only to discover that I must hear—if I hear anything at all—either Beethoven's Seventh Symphony or Mozart's Symphony in G minor; either the Coriolan Overture or the Overture to Euryanthe; either Chabrier's Bourrée Fantasque (which I have never heard) or Sibelius's Finlandia; and, at the opera, I am offered Aida! Now this is all very discouraging to a man of temperament who would like to order his music as he orders his library or his veal kidneys. One is never obliged to eat at some one else's behest, one reads according to one's fancy, but when one wants to listen to music, one must perforce listen to what is being played or else not listen at all, unless—and here one must admit the futility of the comparison—one is Ludwig of Bavaria. This afternoon I have a whim to attend a concert which shall consist of César Franck's D minor symphony, Stravinsky's Sacre du Printemps, and Debussy's La Mer. Franck's symphony will, of course, be performed some time this winter, but the performance will be sure to fall on a day on which I have no ambition to hear it, and the other pieces will not, in all probability, be performed at all.

My temporary prejudices and tastes in music, indeed, never seem to be in accord with my opportunities. I longed for many years, for example, to hear Vincent d'Indy's Istar. The idea of the music disrobing, as the goddess of the legend disrobed, awakened my curiosity which was still further whetted by the rhapsodies which Philip Hale and James Huneker have constructed around the piece. But curiosity dies in time and on the day when, finally, I saw the thing announced, I discovered, to my surprise, that all appetite had left me. Nevertheless, on a bright winter afternoon, when I should have preferred to walk in the

park or to go to a moving-picture theatre, I forced myself into the concert-hall. The hall was over-heated and stuffy; I was surrounded by a crowd of hysterical females who had come to see a Russian violinist, whose name, had it been translated, was Mike or Alec. I sat through a long program, for Istar was last, and when, finally, it was played I began idly to turn over the pages of my book of notes about the music, reading the advertisements with an interest which I found I could not devote to the composition itself. To that, in fact, I scarcely listened. This is not a unique experience; it is usual. The evenings on which I yearn to hear Boris Godunoff they always sing *L'Amore dei Tre Re* at the Opera; the afternoons on which I have a deep longing to listen to Liszt's B minor sonata, the Hofmanns and Bauers and Moiseivitsches all are busy playing Chopin's.

This is very confusing and irritating, for taste in music changes, especially if you hear a good deal of it. I have worshipped at several altars. To some of them I return when I can. The cool, sane, classic beauty of Gluck, the gay, sweet-sour, tragic-comedy of Mozart, the red blare and poster-like dash of American ragtime, the lovely music of Debussy, so like the nocturnes of Whistler, the refreshing melody of Arthur Sullivan, these are seldom unwelcome, but the days on which I enjoy the orchestral orgies of Richard Strauss, the trumpet blasts of Richard Wagner, the fantastic inventions of Hector Berlioz, and the thunderbolts of Beethoven come more rarely. Other intermittent humours find me hankering for the ironic acidity of the quaintly perverse *l'Heure Espagnole*, the bombast of Handel, whom Samuel Butler very nearly succeeded in making famous again, Grieg's piano concerto, Chinese music, the adumbrations of Charles Martin Loeffler, and the thrilling experiments of Leo Ornstein, but seldom do mood and music strike me simultaneously.

There are days on which the charming melancholy and sentimentality of Werther and Eugene Onegin, lyric dramas curiously similar in feeling, would come as a boon. There are nights when "Les Larmes" would send me sobbing from the theatre, for this air and the letter song in Tschaikovsky's opera evoke a certain artificial atmosphere of grief more potently than any book or picture with which I am familiar. When Tatjana begins the letter song, if you are in the mood—and how seldom this is!—the key of the play is handed into your keeping, the soul of the composition communes with your own soul, and a vague sympathy with something perhaps alien to your own nature takes possession of you.

Sometimes I am seized with a desire for the dance, a desire for a conventional rhythmic expression, for, at least, even if one cannot dance, one sometimes wants to hear dance music, but these will not be the nights on which the Beautiful Danube, Coppélia, or Beethoven's Seventh Symphony will be played. *Der Rosenkavalier* would fill the breach, but how often can one hear *Der Rosenkavalier*?

I have never heard the *Barber of Seville* without enjoying it, but there are times when I burn to carry Rossinian explorations farther, when I might perhaps take delight in *L'Italiana in Algeri*, *Tancredi*, with its still delicious, although unheard, "Di tanti palpiti," sacred to the memory of Giuditta Pasta, *William Tell*, and *La Cenerentola*. Often, indeed, sitting before the fire in my garret, I wistfully beg the gods to put it into somebody's head to play me the tunes I have read about so often, but which now I can only hear in my mind's ear through the cold formality of the printed score: Félicien David's *Le Désert*, for example, that "ode-symphonie" which Hector Berlioz hailed as a *chef-d'œuvre* and which seemingly remained a *chef-d'œuvre* until the calm ironic Auber one day remarked, "I will wait until David gets off his camel." Either the remark or the subsequent dismounting killed the piece for now it is never played. But I would like to hear it. What could be quainter than Second Empire orientalism? Would Ingres's *Odalisque* come to life under this influence and stand in ivory perfection in some sheik's harem, listening to the call of the muezzin, while the camels tramped the desert with their lumbering, swaying passing? What of Spontini's *La Vestale*? Would this faded score do for Rome what Gluck's music has done for Greece? I can decorate my garret with mid-Victorian trophies, antimacassars, walnut highboys, wall-paper representing Roman temples with Victorian shepherd boys playing pipes near their columns, while troops of ladies, dressed like Mrs. Leo Hunter, take boats and embark for Cythera. I can examine at my leisure mezzotints and engravings by John Martin, Richard Earlom, Valentine Green, Goltzius, Edelinck, or J. R. Smith, and I can enjoy the mellow cornfields and forests of George Inness whenever I feel like it, which is not too often. I can take down from the shelves *The Monk* by M. G. Lewis, *Headlong Hall* by Thomas Love Peacock, *The Art of Dining* by Abraham Hayward, *The Truth about Tristrem Varick* by Edgar Saltus, or read of one of Ouida's wasp-figured guardsmen as often as I please. No strange, old-fashioned byway, no hidden cranny of painting or literature is denied me, but if I were dying of desire to listen to Purcell's *Dido*

and Aeneas, Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie*, Balfe's *The Maid of Artois*, or even Wagner's *Die Feen* or Puccini's *Edgar*, I should perish before the medicine arrived.

Watteau, Voltaire, Cranach, H. B. Fuller, Rodin, and Joseph Hergesheimer stand ready to please me whenever I am in the proper mood to appreciate their work but, unless I follow Ernest Newman's example—which I am not likely to do—and purchase a player-piano, I am dependent on the Paris Opéra or Mr. Walter Damrosch for the privilege of listening to Lully, Couperin, or Grétry. Even Ernest Newman must listen to most of his music in transcription—transcriptions, which he admits in his laudatory book on the subject, have been made carelessly enough for the most part from transcriptions already fashioned for human players, without reference to the orchestral scores, which the player-piano, being gifted with more than two hands, could more nearly duplicate—and in relation to such music as has not been cut in rolls he would stand in just the same position that I stand. Could he, for instance, buy a roll of *Le Désert*? At this very instant, in reference to my mention of Grétry an inch or two above, I would rather hear a performance of *Richard Cœur de Lion*, of which an excerpt, quoted in Tschaikovsky's *Pique Dame*, has haunted me ever since I heard that opera, than the complete works of Giuseppe Verdi. Nay! I think I would desert all other pleasures, even an evening at the theatre where Delysia plays, for a performance of the rewritten version of *Simone Boccanegra*. I might want to hear it only once, but how much I do want to hear it that once! At least I want to to-day. In 1926, when Gatti-Casazza at last mounts *Simone Boccanegra* at the Metropolitan Opera House, I shall probably go to bed entirely ignorant of the fact. Curiosity and desire will equally be dead, probably, so far as Cornelius's *The Barber of Bagdad*, Nicolai's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini* are concerned, when the time at last comes when it will be easy for me to satisfy this curiosity and desire.

The case is no better with modern music. It is just as difficult to satisfy one's yearning to hear Dukas's *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* as it is to hear Offenbach's *Barbe-Bleue*. The Boston Symphony Orchestra probably will perform Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* on the night when I am hungry for the *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*, and Bodanzky will provide these last delights on the night when I can be satisfied with nothing but *Daphnis et Chloë*. This is assuredly music in the modern French idiom, although Erik Satie has said, "Ravel has refused the Legion of

Honour, but all his music accepts it," and we know that in ten years this epigram will become a platitude. We have heard a good deal from the modern Italians, Respighi and Malipiero lately, but I wanted to hear them two years ago.

On the whole it is amazing that I or anybody else ever acquires a taste for orchestral music or the opera. We are, it would seem, completely in the power of Messrs. Bodanzky, Gatti-Casazza, Stokovski, Pierre Monteux, the Messrs. Sargent and Milton Aborn, and Fortuno Gallo. They not only decide what we shall hear, they decide when we shall hear it. The situation, of course, is monstrous and unbearable. A few comparisons may bring it to you more forcibly. Suppose, for instance, that the directors of the Metropolitan Art Museum issued a decree to the effect that you could see Manet's Boy with a Sword only on July 17, 1922, and not again until February 4, 1930. Suppose that these gentlemen further ordered that Renoir's portrait of Madame Charpentier would be on view only on odd sundays during Lent. Suppose that the Greek vase room or the room containing the Chinese porcelains was only open to the public on December 6, 1922. Let us imagine another example, even more terror-inspiring. Suppose that Messrs. Brentano, Scribner, and Putnam, arbitrarily decided that the public could buy certain books only on certain days. On January 1, for example, Putnam's would sell only the works of Harold Bell Wright, Brentano's only Shaw's new volume of Plays, and Scribner's, Joseph Hergesheimer's San Christóbal de la Habana. On January 2, one would be permitted to purchase the novels of James Branch Cabell at Putnam's, Benedetto Croce's Aesthetic at Brentano's, and Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol at Scribner's. On January 3, Putnam's would dole out a new novel by Sinclair Lewis, Brentano's would vend a book by Arthur Machen (if they could find one!), and Scribner's would sell Mencken's A Book of Prefaces. On January 4, perhaps I might persuade Putnam's to put out my The Tiger in the House; Brentano's would offer Max Beerbohm's Seven Men; and Scribner's would display The Newcomes by William Makepiece Thackeray. January 5 would be the day to buy Esther Waters at Putnam's, William Dean Howell's Heroines of Fiction, at Brentano's, and Wyndham Lewis's Tarr at Scribner's. On January 6, Putnam's would sell Philip Moeller's Sophie, Brentano's Donald Evans's Sonnets from the Patagonian, and Scribner's, Webster's Dictionary. Of course Dutton's, Malkin's, Drake's, Stammer's, Schulte's, and Goldsmith's, and the officials of the Public Library would also make arbitrary decisions about

the book of the day. This would all seem very strange, no doubt, and probably we would stop buying books, because the particular book we wanted would never be on sale on the day we wanted it, but it would be no stranger than the situation in the concert and opera world.

The places where one must listen to music are also prescribed. One can read a book by the fire, in an apple orchard, or in the Grand Central Station—an excellent place to read some books, by the way—but if I want to hear an orchestra I must go to a concert-hall where the atmosphere is fetid, sit in a hard-backed chair, surrounded by women smelling of opopanax, muguet, and Mary Garden and men who have been smoking Lillian Russell cigars.

And yet, it would appear, there is no remedy. Concerts, after all, must be given within certain hours, and the number of pieces that can be played during these hours—a concert that lasts over 120 minutes is too long—is strictly limited. The Metropolitan Opera House can give only one full-length opera, or not more than three short ones, on one evening. Consequently somebody has to make a choice. The directors naturally choose the works which they think will appeal to the greatest number of people at the time they are played. This accounts for the fact that a symphony which perhaps has not been performed at all for several years will be announced for performance in New York by four conductors during as many weeks.

So we must put up with the inconvenience. We must listen to music when we can, where we can, and with whom we can, and not when, where, and with whom we want to. I wonder if there are others who dream of Debussy's *l'Après-midi d'un Faune* while they are listening to Berlioz's *Fantastic Symphony*, who go to hear Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* when they would prefer to hear Gluck's *Armide*. If some one knows what can be done about it, I hope he will tell me.